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On the Social Environment of Child Development

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of a number of social environments and their specific features important for children's progress. The author sets a goal: to create the conditions for a happy future for our children. The author stresses priority of quality preschool education from the viewpoint of supporting future competitiveness of country citizens capable to work in conditions of the innovation economy. The author comes to conclusion that the young generation of parents and their children turn into one of the major resources for Russia's getting to a meaningful for the world state. Only working with young families today, we can lay foundations of the state's future livability and political stability.

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Key words: roadmap, predominance of childhood, multicultural environment, educated parenthood, educational environments.

Many events affecting the social life of children have taken place in recent years. Many of those have yet to be profoundly comprehended. We have few research studies carried in Russia on these matters; the state does not have enough resources to do this or, possibly, it does not yet have the capacity to concentrate these resources in the hands of interested individuals. Please pay attention: higher education in Russia is presently going through a complicated process of transformation. In the nearest future, outcomes of a new monitoring of higher schools will be announced to be followed by another sequence of universities' transformations. The previous monitoring touched fates of many pedagogical schools. And the process of optimization is still going on. Let me remind you that the Russian Academy of Education has gone through a complex period of its

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reorganization, and the humanitarian sciences experience a certain crisis in connection with the decline of the interest of top authorities in them.

Generally speaking, those organizations which are meant to keep the pedagogical thought in progress are presently undergoing certain organizational difficulties. This is the only reason I can find to explain the insufficient interest in the theme of childhood which is presently coming to the agenda. This is why our conference is as essential as ever before. I am grateful to its organizers for the opportunity to speak today and also to listen to national and international scholars' opinions.

It is hard to overestimate the role of the family in the process of socialization and establishing a child's personality. While Russians put the family at the top of the list of their values, one half of all marriages fall apart. In 2012, for each 1000 marriages, there came nearly half of that amount of divorces. In the period from 2005 to 2011, the quota of divorced spouses with children went up by 10 percent. In 2005, each second divorce was bonded with minor children, while in 2011, 2 out of 3 divorces occurred in families with children. 60 percent of all divorces take place within the first 5 years of living together. More than one-fourth of children were born to unmarried mothers. The number of parents deprived of parental rights goes up. In 2012, 654,355 orphaned children and children without parental care were registered at child protection agencies [1]. The number of children born out of marriages keeps going on. Social and spiritual deformation of children's environment aggravates the situation.

In addition, a child's world is quite cruel, something that child psychologists have unanimously shown. This means that in order not to subject a child to the risk of being unaccepted in and expelled from their community, we must work with the child's parents. Not only do we need legal regulations administering relations between a parent and a child, but it is important to revise the present institutes in order to provide a child's parents with broader choices of existing options.

For example, we shall take a new look at the potential of homeschooling. We have certain prejudices against teaching children out of school walls; as if the school was the only place for children's socialization. However, American Dr. Brian Ray had carried quite broad-scale surveys in 2009 which showed that, judging by testing results in all disciplines, homeschooled children excel their coevals studying at schools by an average of 34-39 percent.

The recently adopted Law "On Education in the RF" [2] contains the standard of family education as a form of educating.

Another recent trend: more attention to preschool education. By the data of the Higher School of Economy, preschool education is the most rapidly-growing market from the viewpoint of public demand. At the same time, it came out in the course of monitoring that children's health has the primary position in assessing the quality of PEI services. These are the key characteristics that parents look at when choosing a kindergarten. The second indicator of quality is "openness" of the kindergarten to parents' interests and needs. At the same time, on average, availability of additional educational programs, educational diversity, and being provided with toys were of practically no significance for parents all over the country.

Internet accessibility and computer usage came into view of the scholars. As it turned out, there is either no computer at all, or they are kept in the officials' offices at half of inspected institutions. And children's access to computers for playing special educational and edutainment games could not be acknowledged as a well-spread practice. There were certain disproportions registered in the age structure of PEI employees: particularly, there are quite a few teachers "of age" in the preschool sector. However, this is not the worst factor. Another thing is the "ontological gender disbalance." Children at preschool institutions probably think that there are no male teachers whatsoever. A peculiar tendency of our days is the number of teachers who are not native speakers of the Russian language, and this is another issue.

In 2008, the "My Generation" Charitable Foundation together with the International Methodical Association held a foresight survey "Childhood 2030" in Russia. The experts set a goal: to create the conditions for a happy future for our children. One of the project outcomes was a roadmap which presented the most important spheres, solutions, and efforts which can provide the society with the most favorable development scenario. These included: demography and migration; culture and creativity; construction development and

habitats; family and parenthood; education, health, and ecology; business for childhood; means of social mobility. The forecast included, among other things, emergence of responsible parent communities, elimination of language barriers; eradication of territorial and age restrictions on access to education, profession, and employment. Zones of social stress in Russia, i.e., periods of possible major changes in the society's structure, had been identified.

I would like to make a point that social migration noticeably affects the situation with children's socialization.

This way, under the frames of the foresight study we had identified three major stress zones: the demographic crisis of 2012-2016; the 2014-2018 crisis caused by migration processes; and the 2015-2020 crisis of the Russian family. And what had looked like a forecast in 2008 has presently turned into reality. Intensity of migration flows had skyrocketed in a short period of time and led to major unstructured accumulations of migrants in major cities and industrial megacities [3]. Mostly, these are young males with poor command of Russian and often with absolutely no working skills. At the same time, the state policy plans to create 25 million "good and high-paid" jobs by 2020. We already have the situation when residents of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, who speak poor Russian and have no pedagogical or any education at all, work as nurses and teachers at kindergartens. That said, in order to educate competitive future citizens of our country, capable to work under conditions of the very innovative economy, we must start with preschool education. Conditionally speaking, it should be a professor to teach an infant under the age of 5 years, and not a semiliterate immigrant nurse.

Let's look at some of the statistics: of the 700 thousand of Moscow school students, about 100 thousand are migrants' children. Due to compact settling of migrants, this results in about 30% of elementary school students in the South, South-East and East Districts of Moscow to have poor command of the Russian language. In the case when children in a classroom have different levels of language training, the class gets divided not by "advanced" and "basic" but by a "locals" and "strangers" principle. Surveys carried out by employees of the Institute of Education of HSE NRU at several dozens of Moscow schools showed that division by "locals" and "strangers" starts at the senior grades, when family intervenes in the international education of a student [4].

How can we change this situation? It is doable only through meticulous working with families, children from multi-national groups, and specialists. In particular, we propose: 1. to hold lessons of world religions and secular ethics at schools on a differentiated basis, i.e., for preschool students, elementary school students, junior teenagers, senior teenagers, and parents; 2. to provide personnel training, i.e., teachers at schools and kindergartens who will work under this program, with utilization of new methodical instructions; 3. to engage young migrants in Russian social networks (the mobile service unlocks connections between migrants within their diasporas at the account of a circle of real and virtual friends among the native population and facilitates learning of spoken Russian as of the language of internal network communications); 4. to organize social/psychological training courses for heads of national communities and seniors, various individuals holding leading positions, school teachers, parents of migrant children. Laws and initiatives presently considered at various Committees of the RF SD are focused on regulating migrant flows. However, at the state level we have never formulated what kind of migration we need.

"It is hard to imagine this today," American futurologist George Friedman claimed, "but by 2030, countries will start competing for migrants. Development of the migration policy will be connected not with the quest for ways for prohibiting migrants' coming, but quite the opposite, their attracting. Even America will have to invent incentives for immigrants." The same America, for example, according to George Friedman, will need immigration of two types. The first one is for servicing ageing Americans. The second type is focused on people developing new technologies for enhancement of labor intensity: physicists, engineers, physicians, etc. Our children will have to live several social lives in the course of their lives, take care of four future pensioners; people from other countries and cultures will be their neighbors; while they will have to compete under conditions of the global market.

In connection with this, the author proposed to look for new mechanisms regulating the process of the new generation's learning of the ethnic and general national cultures with the purpose of spiritual enrichment, formation of readiness for and capacity to live in a multi-cultural media.

The culture, being a genetic program socio-code of the civilization, outlines, among other things, functioning of a protecting system of the state organism. As a consequence, lack of focused state policies in the sphere of culture, especially under conditions of mutual intersystem crossings of various religions and cultures and rapidly changing information space, the society loses sustainability of reproduction of traditional spiritual and moral values. This might lead to destruction of citizens' personal self-identification, especially of the young ones.

The Foresight Project proposed to look in big cities for additional personnel resources for solving problems with preschool personnel. Care for younger children is very strong in our society, but we do not use this resource. It is hard for us to imagine volunteers working at kindergartens, or next door babushkas, or old men helping kindergarten teachers. However, we shall not be able to resolve kindergarten problems without exploiting family resources.

It will not be a huge exaggeration to say that in the majority of cases (and this quota will be going up) children are brought up by nannies and not by their parents. Also, children are educated by animated cartoons, computer games, communities of their peers in the courtyards, schools, universities; sometimes by teachers and educators, i.e., pedagogues. This is what we generally call the environment of child development.

If we consider the issue of preschool education not based exclusively on the state preschool education of children, we will encounter the problem that those structures which successfully function in the west do not work in our country. For example, we have no "institute of nannies." There is no civilized service of nannies and governesses. It is hard for us to accept the idea that socialization might be taking place under different from state PEI conditions. The present market and out-of-state's censorship spontaneous network of recruiting agencies for hiring daycare assistants cannot be controlled by parents either. The idea is that a parent leaves their child to the care of a stranger. However, the parent should have an alternative: to put the child in a private kindergarten, under the care of a nanny, or in a state institution. All of these services will be put under state control. And this does not imply punitive agencies, but regulating these kinds of activities and assisting them.

Scholars from Harvard University had already proved that if a child's intelligence had not been developed under the age of three, it is more difficult to accomplish this afterwards. Conditionally speaking, a child's absolute and inborn capacity to learn languages closes down around the age of three. However, the old pedagogical theories still dominate our country; according to those, a child should not be taught a second language while he/she has not mastered the first one in order to avoid confusing the child.

It is obvious that in the situation of the market of preschool educational services, the state must help out the parent willing to educate and bring up his/her children. In the very least, it should help with organization of services for parent training. It is a question of the following: if a family becomes a subject of state care, corresponding services must be established. Besides this, the state must also take care of parents' educating. At a first look, this sounds intimidating.

In this sense, studies of psychologist Ivan Zabayev are of a special interest. For example, the idea that parents who while do love their children, behave in such a way that this might be questioned, because they often minimize their time spent with their child. As official statistics show, the average parent talks with his/her adolescent for 15 minutes per day. Ironically, most parents have nothing to talk about with their children, but to ask if the child has done their homework assignments. Another broadly-spread fact is that any child (at any age) is considered as something deficient. There is no attitude to a child as to an equal personality.

At the same time, in many countries of the world including Russia, a new generation of parents united with the idea of happy childhood is spontaneously emerging. Their lives are to a big extent devoted to the parent's role. Such parents are followers of various pedagogical methods which they prefer to the state system of education. They organize private kindergartens and advocate homeschooling. Sometimes they decline the Russian system of healthcare, give birth to children at home or go abroad to do this. They choose not to vaccinate their children and choose the methods of homeopathic clinics instead. They carry children in slings

ignoring orthopedists' warnings, take air flights at any terms of pregnancies. These parents actively refute any imposed stereotypes of the past like that education of a child demands major sacrifices, hinders careers, traveling, communicating with friends, and that adoption of a child as a genuine heroism.

These are the types of people that are in the vanguard of the coherent demolition of the perception of the "childhood" concept. However, inside this general trend, there are numerous, not fully-formed, and often contradicting tendencies among themselves. All of these trends and tendencies curl over and encounter in spontaneous and uncontrolled ways; from the view point of officials-of-medicine and education they all are equally marginal, and no particular studies of these methods have been carried out. Under these conditions, any theories very quickly radicalize; parents' organizations, activities of which are often compared with sects', are extreme manifestations of that. This is exactly why we can feel such an acute need in the open civil discussion of all these matters.

We are united in this with Europe and other developed countries. The crisis of education and healthcare, insufficient material immunity of parents and children, numerous social and demographic problems put European parents in front of similar to our goals to review the general approach to the perception of the concept of "childhood". The ideas we use of competent approach to parenthood are even clearer there than they are in Russia. At the same time, they also do not receive any active and targeted state support, while they are much more actively supported by private benefactors.

Generally speaking, this reorientation to investing efforts in children is a global trend. For example, one of U.S. President Barak Obama's major programs is Early Childhood Education. This is connected with the fact that, as it has been proven not once; the earlier and more generously we involve ourselves in our children's progress, the better the outcome for their futures.

If family is put in the core of the state's interests, it is, no doubt, important to make sure that businesses would also listen to the above mentioned line of actions. It might sound unusual for a Russian ear, but portals for cooperation between children and adult audiences should exist at each enterprise, so that a family could be united while parents are busy at work. It will then become clear that the family is the most important thing. A parent should have a chance to be next to his/her child at any time; this is why it is so important to expand options for parents' participation in schools and preschools' activities. The state should support those businesses which care about this.

Until now, the practice of educating children at specific institutions (schools, preschools, etc.) was most generally accepted. This practice imposes that the society becomes generally closed in regards of the rules of behavior towards children. In the meantime, a city should have, on the one hand, a system of spaces and places where children could realize their goals and actively interact with adults, and, on the other hand, capacities for teaching all categories of adults dealing with children (from bus drivers, waiters, and street cleaners to city officials). In an environment where a child can acquire certain skills, there should be corresponding sites for bringing together the lives of adults and children (restaurants with children's rooms, where children could learn to cook; hair salons where children could have haircuts and learn how to style their hair appropriate for their age group, etc.). Density of such sites where children could efficiently and reasonably interact with the adult world should be adequate: such places should be scattered around the city with adequate regularity. Specifically, city communities should be classified in regards of children, their participation and organization of a friendly and developing environment for children in cities. This also presumes establishment of special conditions for parents' on-going education and enhancement in accordance with the age of their child. Parents should have opportunities to acquire corresponding qualifications in various spheres in order to be able to maintain contact with their children, follow and understand their progress. Communities' activities should not only be focused on cleanliness, order and comfort for adults, but, in the first place, provide comfort for children's lives with elements of child development.

Essentially, childhood should enter all spheres of our life. It should not matter whether a parent works at this institution. As one example, in Cyprus, children in kindergartens go on field trips. To us, it might seem strange when kindergarten children go for an excursion to an airport, water purification facilities, local police offices, local packing facilities. You could ask: what for? And they would answer you that a child cannot grow

up in an artificially-created environment. Only when “communicating” with real nature and the city environment can they truly turn into free and creative adults.

The “My Generation” Foundation is looking for such approaches under the frames established in the 2011 training course on “Educated Parents: a Child-Friendly Environment;” they are trying to shape a typical program which could make parents interested, who need educating and not learning. The Foundation’s Project “The School of Success” was established for children and teenagers with the goal to teach them new skills in singing, dance, photography, and other arts. The know-how of a joint action “A Time to Pay Back” of the same Foundation together with the RF Civic Chamber and partner organizations could give a positive example to the young generation; its goal was to collect funds for costly heart surgeries for elderly people. The funds collected in the course of the action will be used for heart surgeries with utilization of hybrid technologies. For the majority of elderly people this is the only way to extend their living. This example creates a responsible and careful attitude for seniors into teenagers’ minds.

Parallel to this, the My Generation Foundation supports those advanced ideas which have already proved their livability in other countries. One of such ideas is the concept of “educational media (communities).” What is the gist of it? In order to let children communicate safely and usefully with each other, complement the lack of attention to them in families and at schools, it is necessary to create an educational environment that is friendly to them. Various hobby groups, clubs, communities, interest groups and project companies can turn into places where a child would be provided with comfortable conditions for everyday life, additional education, vocational guidance, socialization; it is hard to overestimate the value of such centers of children attraction. For example, boys brought up with only the mother could get experience of male education at such centers. If a child cannot get such experience in his/her family, he/she should be provided with a possibility to get this in another environment. The role of a man in the immediate circle is very important for a small child. Family is the most intimate circle. If it is broken, the whole fate of a human being is broken, children psychologists believe. Possibly, these could be some special centers where children with parents could attend various classes and hobby groups. It is presumed, of course, that specialists and pedagogues should teach at such centers. The state control should not vanish under the circumstances. But what could this be? If an individual declares him/herself an organizer of a section or a hobby group, he/she could be encouraged in case of corresponding attestation. The issue of salaries could be resolved under the line of grants and scholarships. By the way, this is another example of stimulating self-employment.

One can bring many examples of this kind. The point is that all of these investments in children are more than justified. Take a look at the events which followed the 2008 global financial crisis. They clearly showed that the world is changing, and the developed world is trying to get onto a new cycle of economic progress: development of innovative “green” economy. A similar transformation will inevitably affect various aspects of human life, create new phenomena and activity spheres. In this situation it is extremely important for Russia to timely “hook up” to the new lifestyle. However, due to the huge inertia related with the unitary character of the state, it will not be able to get leading positions in the new style of life at the account of the present generations, still in the capable age. This means that the young generation of parents and their children turn into one of the major resources for Russia’s getting to a meaningful for the world state. Working with young families today, we are laying foundations of the state’s future livability and political stability.

Trouble-free socialization of a child can take place in a trouble-free environment. And if the attitude to children and childhood will remain in the same state as today, the next generation of Russian people will encounter with very strong stratification of the surroundings by the level of education, material welfare, level of capacities, and perspectives. And a major part of the population might end up in a marginal status in regards of world processes and tendencies.

We downloaded these and other innovative approaches to working with families to the Project of “Educated Parents: a Child-Friendly Environment” which has been implemented since 2011 and brought together more than 1,000 participants (parents, children, specialists). We have positive examples of early education at a specially-established multicultural environment. Many parents, participants of the “Educated Parents” course, went this way. For example, a Russian girl Liza who, at the age of 3.5 years, can successfully learn 4 different

cultures and languages and does not lose her self-identification at that [5]. She has the feeling of patriotism already and shows interest in the history of peoples, their religions and state symbols she studies. The history of Russia and Orthodoxy are especially singled out. We are sure that not only tolerance is being ingrained this way, but also mutual synergy of cultures and religions, enriching their bearer and the society as a whole.

We are sure that working with young families we can lay foundations of the state's future livability, help to establish truly independent personhoods in our children, reveal their potentials and capacities, and mould in them important skills for their child and adult welfare.

[1] *Prezentatsiia komiteta po delam sem'i, detei' i zhenshchin poproektu «Kontseptsiia gosudarstvennoi' semei'noi' politiki v Rossiis'skoi' Federatsii na period do 2025 goda* [Presentation of the RF SD CF Committee on the family, children and women affairs for the project "The Concept of the State Family Policy of the Russian Federation for the period till 2025"] .M.,2013.p.29

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